

SPECIAL FEATURE
JILL STRICKLAND

FEBRUARY 16, 1978

BLACK HISTORY MONTH AT THE KENNEDY CENTER
(INSERTS IN THE TAPE LIBRARY)

ANNCR: FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH IN THE UNITED STATES -- A TIME TO CELEBRATE THE HERITAGE AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF BLACK AMERICANS. ART EXHIBITS, DANCE DEMONSTRATIONS, POETRY READINGS, PLAYS AND LECTURES ARE ONLY A FEW OF THE FORMS THE NATION-WIDE CELEBRATION TAKES. WASHINGTON'S KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS SALUTED BLACK HISTORY MONTH WITH A FREE DANCE DEMONSTRATION FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN AND A SONG-AND-STORYTELLING SESSION FOR THEIR YOUNGER BROTHERS AND SISTERS. VOA'S JILL STRICKLAND ATTENDED BOTH EVENTS -- AND HERE IS HER REPORT:

TAPE: CUT ONE -- AFRICAN DRUM MUSIC BY CHUCK DAVIS DANCE COMPANY --
IN FULL BRIEFLY, THEN FADE UNDER:

VOICE: THE CHUCK DAVIS DANCE COMPANY IS A GROUP OF BLACK AMERICANS WITH A PASSION FOR AFRICAN MUSIC AND DANCE. YEARS OF STUDY IN THE UNITED STATES, AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN HAVE GIVEN THE MEMBERS OF THE TROUPE A SENSE OF MISSION: THEY WANT TO GIVE THEIR AUDIENCE MORE THAN JUST A VISUAL EXPERIENCE. ABDUL SALAAM, ASSISTANT ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE TROUPE, EXPLAINS:

TAPE: CUT TWO -- SALAAM

"WE BELIEVE THAT BY STUDYING DANCES, RHYTHMS AND SONGS FROM THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA AND APPLYING THOSE ANCIENT MODES OF EXPRESSION TO MODERN-DAY CIVILIZATION, THAT IT WOULD EASE SOME OF THE MECHANICAL AND HARSH TENSIONS THAT EXIST IN SOCIETIES TODAY. FOR EVERYTHING IN THE ANCIENT CULTURE, OR MOST THINGS, WERE BASED UPON A RHYTHMIC KIND OF STRUCTURE, AND BY APPLYING THAT FLOW, BY APPLYING THAT EASE OF MOTION, THAT EASE OF SONG, THAT EASE OF DANCE AND THAT EASE OF MUSIC, ONE FEELS MORE PEACEFUL AND FEELS MORE IN COMMUNION WITH HIMSELF AND THE DIVINE FORCES THAT EXIST."

VOICE: THE CHUCK DAVIS COMPANY IS MORE THAN A GROUP OF DANCERS AND DRUMMERS. THE PERFORMERS ARE ALSO TEACHERS, AND THE LESSON THEY TEACH IS THAT THERE IS MUCH MORE TO AFRICAN MUSIC AND DANCE THAN MANY PEOPLE REALIZE. BEFORE THE CHILDREN LEFT THE KENNEDY CENTER THAT AFTERNOON, THEY HAD LEARNED THE AFRICAN NAMES OF SEVERAL KINDS OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS; THE NAMES OF VARIOUS ARTICLES OF CLOTHING WORN BY THE PERFORMERS; AND THE STORIES BEHIND SEVERAL DANCES FROM DIFFERENT REGIONS OF AFRICA. THEY KNEW THAT THERE ARE DANCES FOR BEAUTIFUL WOMEN AS WELL AS WARRIORS, AND COMPETITIVE DANCES IN WHICH MEN AND WOMEN TRY TO OUTDO EACH OTHER. SOME OF THE CHILDREN WERE EVEN PICKED TO DANCE ON STAGE WITH THE COMPANY! LATER, ONE OF THE DANCERS, KOLAWOLE BALOGUN, TOLD WHERE THE CHUCK DAVIS COMPANY FINDS ITS MATERIAL:

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BALOGUN

"A LOT OF OUR WORKS ARE INSPIRED WORKS, WORKS THAT WE HAVE EITHER SEEN FROM OUR TRAVELS TO AFRICA, OF FROM AFRICANS BEING IN NEW YORK WHO COME TO OUR CLASSES IN OUR STUDIO, AND ARE BEAUTIFUL (KIND) ENOUGH TO TEACH US SOME OF THEIR STEPS AND THEIR DANCES, AND TO ALLOW US TO USE THEIR WORKS IN OUR REPERTOIRE. THEN AGAIN, WE HAVE THOSE SITUATIONS THAT WE CONTRIVE FROM OUR OWN EXPERIENCES WITHIN HARLEM, BED-STUY (BEDFORD-STUYVESANT), BRONX, BROWNSVILLE, YOU KNOW -- THEN WE PUT ALL THAT TOGETHER, AND WE MAKE IT A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF OUR OWN. SEE, WE DON'T TRY TO SAY THAT WE'RE AFRICAN DANCERS, PER SE. WE'RE AFRO-AMERICAN ARTISTS, AND WE USE BOTH ENTITIES -- THE AFRICAN VERNACULAR AND THE AMERICAN VERNACULAR -- TO PUT THAT ALL TOGETHER WITHIN OUR CHOREOGRAPHY."

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- AFRICAN DRUM MUSIC BY CHUCK DAVIS DANCE COMPANY --
IN FULL BRIEFLY, THEN FADE UNDER:

VOICE: WHILE NINE AND TEN-YEAR-OLDS DANCED TO THE DRUMS OF THE CHUCK DAVIS COMPANY, PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN WERE LISTENING TO FOLKLORIST MARY CARTER SMITH IN ANOTHER PART OF THE KENNEDY CENTER. MRS. SMITH IS A FORMER TEACHER AND LIBRARIAN WHO HAS

VOICE: WRITTEN POETRY FOR AS LONG AS SHE CAN REMEMBER. HER MESSAGE
(CONT'D)

IS ALWAYS THE SAME: THAT LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING CAN OVERCOME
RACIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS. SHE TOLD THE CHILDREN STORIES
OF FAMOUS BLACK HISTORICAL FIGURES -- AND SANG THEM SONGS
LIKE THIS ONE:

TAPE: CUT FIVE -- SMITH SINGING "WHAT COLOR IS GOD'S SKIN?" -- IN
FULL FOR ONE CHORUS, THEN FADE UNDER:

VOICE: AFTER HER PERFORMANCE, MARY CARTER SMITH EXPLAINED WHY SHE
FEELS IT'S IMPORTANT TO TELL AUDIENCES OF FOUR-AND-FIVE-YEAR-
OLDS ABOUT PEOPLE LIKE THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ABOLITIONIST
SOJOURNER TRUTH -- AND TO SING THEM SONGS ABOUT TOLERANCE AND
UNDERSTANDING:

TAPE: CUT SIX -- SMITH

"WHAT I'M REALLY DOING (IS), I'M BEING SNEAKY, OKAY? (LAUGHS)
I AM EDUCATING THE CHILDREN, OR EXPOSING THEM TO THINGS, WITHOUT
THE CHILDREN REALIZING THAT THEY ARE BEING EDUCATED AND INFLU-
ENCED. AND I DO IT BECAUSE I BELIEVE IT IS FOR GOOD. I THINK
IF WE DON'T GET TO OUR CHILDREN, THAT OUR COUNTRY AS WE KNOW
IT, IN TWO HUNDRED MORE YEARS, WILL NOT BE THE STRONG COUNTRY
IT IS NOW."

VOICE: SOME OF THE STORIES MARY CARTER SMITH TELLS SHE FINDS IN BOOKS.
BUT MANY OTHERS SHE LEARNS FROM THE PEOPLE SHE MEETS IN HER
TRAVELS ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD. DURING FOUR
TRIPS TO AFRICA, SHE HAS LEARNED SONGS AND STORIES IN SEVERAL
LANGUAGES WHICH SHE SINGS AND TELLS TO HER AMERICAN FRIENDS.
AND SHE ALSO CARRIES AMERICAN FOLKLORE OVERSEAS. IF YOU ASK HER
WHAT SHE CALLS HERSELF, SHE REPLIES: "JUST CALL ME A GRIOT
(GREE-OH)," USING THE WEST AFRICAN TERM FOR A TRADITIONAL ORAL
HISTORIAN OR STORYTELLER. BUT SOME PEOPLE WOULD SAY THAT
MARY CARTER SMITH IS MORE LIKE A MISSIONARY -- ONE WHO TRANSMITS
HER MESSAGE THROUGH POETRY AND SONG.

TAPE: CUT SEVEN -- SMITH SINGING "WHAT COLOR IS GOD'S SKIN?" -
IN FULL BRIEFLY, THEN FADE AND HOLD UNDER:

VOICE: MARY CARTER SMITH -- ONE OF THE PERFORMERS IN A SPECIAL BLACK
HISTORY MONTH PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN AT WASHINGTON'S KENNEDY
CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS. (MUSIC UP TO TIME)

#

RK/AA